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04

2019

## Seventy years of NATO: Is the Alliance still needed?

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### Introduction

This year the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) marks seventieth anniversary of its creation. Back in 1949, the founding nations gathered around the United States as the leader of Western liberal democracies, establishing NATO as a military and political alliance that was to serve as a barrier against the Soviet Union, and its “export” of communism throughout the continent. Just six years later, Moscow assembled the Warsaw Pact together with other Eastern European communist countries, excluding Yugoslavia. The Warsaw Pact was to

serve as a counterbalance to NATO and the era of the Cold War gained full sway, with clearly established division in Europe between the capitalist West and communist East, and with only a handful of European countries opting for neutrality. Thus, a bipolar system of world order was established, with defined territories and frontiers of the two global adversaries, and the Cold War pertained until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. From 1991 onwards, fifteen new independent states emerged from the disintegrated Soviet Union, with the

newly founded Russian Federation as its legal successor and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Subsequently the Warsaw Pact had collapsed, and Eastern European countries used a transition period that was to bring them closer to the West, ultimately to NATO and the European Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the single most important event in history after the World War II and the world entered into a new era. Back in early nineties, it seemed that Russia and the West have buried the tomahawk of war for an indefinite time, and many political theorists and politicians, in both NATO member states and in Russia, have stated that without its archrival NATO no longer had *raison d'être*.

### **NATO thirty years after the collapse of the USSR**

Notwithstanding, almost 30 years after the Eastern Bloc crumbled, NATO is a functional organization, and all the debates about the meaning of its existence have not shaken its importance as the bedrock of Western security structure. On the contrary, throughout the last three decades, NATO was expanding its membership, accepting even some of the ex-Soviet republics, and reached the borders of Russia itself. With the new rise of Russian power in Eastern Europe, there are calls for the North Atlantic Alliance to be stronger and more determined to face new threats more boldly than ever.

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The Cold War era may have ended, but the old divisions in Europe are alive again, only in a different way. Contemporary threats are not divided linearly as they were before, and the competition between regional and global rivals takes different shapes. With the ascent of internet and digital technologies, the warfare is being placed more to the cyber world. Modern warfare is more asymmetrical than ever before, and clear lines of division that had existed before 1991 are more blurred and irrelevant. NATO may still be the most successful and the strongest military alliance in history, but its mission is nowadays somewhat undefined and NATO cohesion between its member states has been diluted.

### **Russia as an old and new adversary of NATO**

NATO was never idle since the end of the Cold War. In two waves of enlargement in 1999 and in 2004, almost the entire European continent was encompassed within NATO. In the meantime, with the new Russian President Vladimir Putin taking the reins in Russia in 2000 and soon

quelling the Chechen uprising and ending the Second Chechen War, Russia made its comeback as a major power on the world stage. During the nineties, Russia was weak and at a certain point on the brink of disintegration. The Russians under the President Boris Yeltsin expected a new partnerships with the West, primarily the Americans. However, NATO's first "out of area" mission in Kosovo and NATO enlargement in March 1999 took the Russians by surprise and disarrayed ideas of a new era of cooperation with NATO. With Putin's ascent to power, Russia entered the period of economic upheaval, political consolidation, and reconstruction of its military capacities.

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NATO tried to build bridges with Russia through various initiatives. In 1994, NATO launched Partnership for Peace program and Russia soon joined the PFP. In 1997, NATO-Russia Founding Act was set as a foundation for bilateral relations between NATO and Russia. In 2002, NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was founded and this Council was used as a forum for cooperation and consultation between NATO and Russia. A year before, the United States suffered the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, and Russia sympathized with the Americans and

at first was not opposing the American war on terror. Nevertheless, NATO enlargement in 2004 when seven Eastern European countries joined the Alliance, including the three ex-Soviet Baltic States, drove a wedge between NATO and Russia. Ever since 2004, Russia perceives NATO as a threat to its national security and seeks to reestablish its dominance in Eastern Europe, in opposition to what Moscow sees as a new attempt of its containment.

### **Russia blocks NATO's plans for further enlargement**

After the American intervention in Iraq in 2003, the prices of oil and gas were soaring rapidly, and since the biggest chunk of Russian export revenues come from fossil fuels exports, the Russian economy was given a strong boost. The Russian leadership used this momentum not just for political consolidation, but also to rebuild its military might and to wait for an opportunity to start taking control in its immediate neighborhood. America's plan to include Georgia and Ukraine to NATO's membership was given a major blow in April 2008 at NATO's Bucharest summit, when American NATO allies, France and Germany, vetoed NATO's Membership action plan (MAP) for the two countries. It was a success for Russian diplomacy which could not allow that a country like Ukraine, with enormous strategic importance for Russia, joins NATO.

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The rift between the NATO allies had occurred five years before the Bucharest summit due to the American intervention in Iraq, which was opposed by many NATO member states in Western Europe, primarily France and Germany. Russia used this lack of unity between NATO member states and conducted a military intervention in Georgia to take control over the two breakaway provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. NATO could do nothing but to watch the Russian military taking initiative and control in the territories that used to belong to the Soviet Union. Russia's Georgia campaign proved to the leadership in Moscow that Russia was strong again and that actions in its neighborhood will not necessarily provoke NATO's counteraction. Thus, with the West embroiled in the biggest economic crisis in decades, Russia realized it was greenlighted to rebuild its presence in the region and to curb further NATO expansion.

### **Ukraine as the trigger for a "new Cold War" between NATO and Russia**

Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the conflict between Ukraine and the

Russian backed rebels in the east of the country that has been unfolding ever since, had brought the relations between NATO and Russia to the lowest point since the Cold War. Russia accused the US for stirring the Euromaidan demonstrations in November 2013 that eventually toppled the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014. The West accused Russia for overt support to the rebels and many NATO member states in Eastern Europe felt threatened by Russia, namely the three Baltic States and Poland. Soon Russia started conducting big military exercises near borders with NATO member states, the biggest one called "Zapad" in September 2017, and NATO answered with the same measures.

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After the NATO summit held in Wales in September 2014, NATO has been strengthening its forces in Eastern Europe and held a number of significant military exercises. NATO-led military exercise dubbed "Trident Juncture 18" during the fall of 2018 in Norway was NATO's biggest military exercise in decades. Ever since 2014, both NATO and Russia started flexing their muscles in near proximity to the border dividing

NATO's Eastern flank and Russia. The relations between the two sides hit the bottom and the Russian Prime Minister warned NATO during the Munich Security Conference in February 2016 of a "new Cold War" breaking out between the two sides. Conflict in Ukraine is the source of permanent crisis in relations between NATO and Russia. The US and the UK keep supporting Ukraine militarily and navy ships of NATO member states enter the Black Sea regularly.

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At the same time, Russia seems relentless in its efforts to destabilize Ukraine and to turn it away from its ambitions to join NATO and the EU. NATO seems to be adamant in showing the unity of its 29 member states, while Russia seeks to undermine NATO's strength that lies in its cohesion. However, NATO allies are divided in their opinion on how to approach Russia. Some NATO members, primarily France and Germany, prefer more of a soft core policy and a diplomatic approach, while the Americans opt for more hard power and a harsh stance toward Russia. France and Germany were also involved in peace brokering with Russia during the negotiations for Minsk I and II protocols. At

the same time, Washington views Russia, along with China, as the main strategic rival to the established world order in which the US is still the dominant power.

### **The rift within NATO**

This rift within NATO is a part of a broader gambit, with the Germans and French seeking to broaden the potential of economic cooperation in the Old Continent. In Paris and especially in Berlin, Moscow is perceived as a vital trading partner, as Russia has huge natural gas and oil reserves needed for German industry, while Germany has the technology needed for modernization of Russian fossil fuel extraction and economy in general. Clear example of this cooperation is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which should bring billions of cubic meters of Russian gas directly into Germany by the end of 2019, bypassing the most important gas transit routes through Ukraine. The Americans are staunch opponents of Nord Stream 2 and strengthening of trading bonds between Germany and Russia.

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The US Congress has imposed sanctions against European companies involved in the Nord

Stream 2 project. In opposition to the mounting Russian geopolitical influence through its expanding energy policy, the US promotes LNG terminals selling American shale gas. Currently, there are 26 LNG terminals in Europe, and close American NATO allies, Poland and Lithuania, who feel threatened by their big Eastern neighbor, have opened new LNG terminals in the Baltic, in Polish Świnoujście and Lithuanian Klaipėda. Energy security has thus become a vital part of national security of many NATO member states in Eastern Europe. It is yet to be seen how relations between Washington and Berlin and Paris will develop, as the two major European capitals seem to be breaking further away from its transatlantic partner. The Aachen Treaty signed between France and Germany in January 2019, that should foment stronger ties between the two countries in the fields of defense and security among others, is another example of distancing between NATO partners in Europe and the US. The US also opposes the second line of Turkish Steam that could deliver Russian gas through Turkey to Southeast Europe. Bulgaria and Greece are NATO allies of huge strategic importance for the US and the future of the second phase of this project is not yet clear. To secure the Southeastern flank of NATO Alliance, the Americans have pushed hard for settlement of name dispute between Greece and FYR Macedonia, renamed

to Northern Macedonia. This settlement has led to signing of the Accession Protocol between NATO and Northern Macedonia in February 2019, and consequently it will lead to full-fledge membership in NATO after ratification of the Protocol by all NATO member states.

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If the second phase of Turkish Stream reaches Serbia, the most loyal ally of Russia in the Balkans, Russian gas will easily reach Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary who harvests close ties with the Kremlin regardless of its NATO membership, and neutral Austria with its major European gas hub in Baumgarten near Vienna. Ever since Donald Trump took over the Oval Office in January 2017, relations between the EU and the US have been in most cases deteriorating. The American President is complaining that European allies are not contributing 2% of their GDP and that Europe should pay for its security and peace that it has been enjoying under the umbrella of NATO for seventy years. On the other hand, the Europeans themselves contribute to severing the transatlantic ties. In November 2018, the

French President Emmanuel Macron called for the formation of a 'real European army' that should defend Europe not just against Russia and China, but against America as well, sparking outcry in both Washington and many European capital cities.

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of all German and French attempts, it is hard to imagine that the Europeans could be apt enough to develop a strong and respectful military, a real European army. The migration crisis and crisis in relations with Russia are clear evidences of how divided the EU is. Most of the Franco-German initiatives are met with adamant opposition by Poland and other Visegrád Group states, the Baltic States, and most recently by Austria and Italy. The Dutch have also dismissed Macron's idea of a "Euro army" soon after his speech in November 2018, and have underpinned the indispensable importance of NATO as the only guarantor of safety in Europe. Regardless of the UK on the exit door from the EU, it is hard to imagine that the British will lose interest in European affairs. To the contrary, once outside the EU, Britain will have more maneuvering space in its foreign and defense policies. A clear evidence of this is the Treaty on Defense and Security Cooperation signed between the UK and Poland

in May 2018. After Brexit, Poland will be the fifth biggest EU member state, and Britain and Poland are closest American allies in Europe and opponents of growing Russian influence in Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, Donald Trump had derided NATO as obsolete even before his inauguration. However, as a President, Donald Trump has been reiterating America's commitment to NATO and called upon European allies to expand their military budgets. During the two years of Donald Trump's tenure in the White House, the US has pulled out of many international agreements, including the Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO, and has threaten to pull out the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, NATO is still the most important alliance the US takes part in. It is hard to imagine that the US can uphold its role as a global leader without NATO. NATO is also the bedrock of European security and the major historical events that took place in Europe throughout the twentieth century manifest how futile the European attempts to create security capacities on their own could be. NATO is one of the cornerstones of American foreign policy not just in Europe, but globally too. Without the framework of NATO, the US cannot curb the growing influence of Russia and China in Europe. Furthermore, the Alliance is still attractive to many newcomers, with

Montenegro joining less than two years ago and Northern Macedonia who will do the same within months. Most significantly, America's pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) could instigate new rivalries between the US and Russia in Europe. In such circumstances, the need for preserving and strengthening NATO will grow on both sides of the Atlantic.

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